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Transition: Contemporary Perspectives on C.I. Lewis*

London & New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 222 pages

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## REFERENCES

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- 1 It is not uncommon, when reading and writing about philosophical traditions, to be highly selective. Especially so when the tradition under review has been contested among its friends and foes alike since its very beginning. This has surely been, and still is, the case with pragmatism, where depending on the narrative spun we would have very different figures foregrounded or rather eclipsed. One might well speak of pragmatisms in the plural, as the Peirceans, the Jamesians, the Deweyans, and so forth<sup>1</sup> – where later installments are usually presented as updated varieties of earlier ones – all have very strong feelings about the (allegedly) competing accounts. More often than not, these accounts formed and then dismantled alliances in order to build master-narratives about longer-term legacies within the tradition. Banners gained in respect, only to progressively fading away and possibly coming back either in disguise or hand in hand with past competitors – sometimes with uncomfortable rust between the two still very much in view. This is what, among other things, makes pragmatism a rather lively and appealing tradition: by studying its trajectory one would in fact face rather surprising twists and turns, a number of intra- and extra-tradition alliances, as well as deep legacies which helped it not only to outlive the philosophical turmoil of the twentieth-century, but also to establish itself among the most promising voices (a choir, indeed) in the twenty-first. This was some productive, as opposed to destructive,

agonism: an engagement only occasionally – yet not unpainfully – stained by politically-driven (that is academic) turf wars.

- 2 Now, the Lewisians, for a long time little more than a jolly book club, are currently on the rising. And for good reasons, according to the editors of the book under review. *Pragmatism in Transition* aims in fact to dust off the work of a mastermind of pragmatism who sat between the gilded age of classical pragmatism and the seminal if contested one of mid-century pragmatism. Despite the relatively poor attendance they received, C.I. Lewis's writings have been in fact pivotal to the very unfolding of the tradition. Lewis himself was a remarkable figure: an enthusiastic student of James and Royce, a suspicious roommate sharing his office with Peirce's (uncollected) papers, a dissenting voice among the "realists" of the 1920s and 1930s, tutor of W. Sellars, Quine, and N. Goodman at Harvard, and most recently godfather of the cognitivist line (as opposed to the conversationalist one, though nomenclatures grew buoyant) within contemporary pragmatism, Lewis played the role of a silent if crucial presence throughout the various stages of the tradition, and hence a book assessing his legacy is a particularly welcome addition to the somewhat thin secondary literature.
- 3 The editors crafted together contributions by more established and younger scholars, which form a rather compact and balanced blend, as they do cover the whole spectrum of Lewis's writings – his philosophical development (Kegley, Olen), moral philosophy (Heney), logic (Shieh), and theory of knowledge (Mayoral, Stump, Westphal, Zarebski) alike –, rather than focusing on his epistemology only as happened too often – though, the imbalance is still towards the latter. What is interesting to notice, if only in passing, is that the editors are best known as Sellars scholars: this is rather telling because, as we know, Lewis and Sellars had a close philosophical relationship (almost a partnership) in their agreeing on the way key philosophical problems should be addressed and yet disagreeing in the solution offered. Two chapters of the book (by Westphal and Zarebski) investigate this liaison in some detail. As a consequence, the book will be of particular interest to Sellars scholars, beyond pragmatist sympathizers or detractors more generally. It will also be of interest for scholars working on the history of analytic philosophy since Lewis was an analytic philosopher, too. Actually, he was perhaps the first and most notable case of a thinker equally influenced by the two traditions, and working to bringing them closer to each other – other candidates being Carnap, Goodman, Quine, White, Putnam, Rorty, and Brandom, with rather disparate goals and strategies. In the volume, this effort in philosophical bridging and cross-fertilization is shown at work by surveying Lewis's swinging path from logical theory to the theory of knowledge through moral and social theory – unfortunately, the latter is given little space in the volume, even if, admittedly, his social philosophy does not shine for originality and timelessness. As a whole, the volume offers plenty of food for thought to advancing our own contemporary investigations into matters of mind, morals, and metaphilosophy. This is in fact the very angle of the collection: namely, to bring Lewis into the contemporary philosophical conversation and check what is still alive and what is instead dead in his work. As with most collections, the quality of the contributions is uneven, but all the chapters are nicely crafted and genuinely contribute to the deepening of an aspect of Lewis's work – to my tastes and interests, the contributions by Heney, Olen, and Mayoral stand out. Rather than summarizing the various chapters, I shall conclude by mentioning a few recurring themes as they surface in the various chapters, concerning the combo of realism, cognitivism, and empiricism.

- 4 As the editors explain in their resourceful introduction to the volume, Lewis's work early and late is characterized by the attempt to enriching the empiricist program (hence demising idealism and rationalism) by bringing to light the interplay of the empirical and the conceptual. This is in fact what he sought to accomplish in his earlier logical and epistemological work, which he then partially revised in his later work on knowledge and (e)valuation. And this is what made him a pragmatist of a kind: namely, the idea that it is really our shifting conceptual apparatus (that is, our shifting conceptual *interests*) what drives our empirical investigations and investigations into the empirical world – the only world creatures like us enjoy and partake in. Now, this is a form of pragmatic *realism* because by attending our *practices of knowledge and valuation* we would keep track not so much of how things *are*, but rather of how what we should be responsive to. Reality becomes a necessary friction in its being a reference point for assessing our interests and projects. This pragmatic realism, itself a radical form of empiricism (of Jamesian ancestry), would then count as a cognitivist approach to philosophical issues as it takes beliefs and values (and hence knowledge and valuation) as equally truth-apt and hence rationally debatable. The wider stakes of this philosophical maneuver lie in fact in Lewis's criticism of those bifurcational accounts of reality (of which nowadays we have brand new, sophisticated accounts) according to which only Humean matters of fact (things and necessities) can be empirically assessable while relation of ideas (modals and morals) should be left to the subjective realm of taste (variously understood). Lewis strongly believed that almost everything under the sun, from logical connectors to aggregates of matters to moral judgments could and actually should be equally assessed with reference to what we take their different reality to be. There would then be not so much degrees of reality (proper as opposed to quasi-truths) but rather different kinds of reality (and hence of truths) corresponding to *how* our concepts about such reality *work*. If this is the blueprint of Lewis's philosophical project, the chapters comprising the volume problematize aspects of it with reference both to the interlocutors of his time (Dewey, logical empiricism, Sellars, Kuhn, Quine) and of ours (the Pittsburgh School, expressivism). It is no surprise, then, that Lewis's name is today brought by some of the most distinguished scholars of pragmatism as a still promising perspective to tackle these philosophical matters, with newer legacies gaining traction – most notably, the Peirce-Lewis axis along which Rosenthal and Misak reconstruct what they think are the best teachings of pragmatism. This volume breaks new interpretative ground, and reinvigorates the conversation between Lewisians and others, thus contributing to the shining of his name in the twentieth-century philosophical pantheon, pragmatist and otherwise.
- 5 A coda on Lewis's metaphilosophy is in order. At face value, Lewis was indeed a philosopher's philosopher if there was one, as he wrote on philosophical problems as they issued in the philosophical discussion as it took place in academic books, journals, and departmental and professional meetings (as also Olen and Sachs mention at p. 4-5). He was actually pivotal to the professionalization of philosophy in the US, and in this respect he led (together with R. B. Perry and a few others colleagues) Harvard and hence American philosophy departments from cultural centers in the widest acceptance of the term to scientific hubs. If, before Lewis, James and Royce trained their students to become finest intellectuals (philosophers or otherwise), after Lewis students would train to become finest academic philosophers (and only occasionally intellectuals). If this picture is certainly accurate (and the masterful work of Bruce Kuklick is the definitive reference), still two things should be noted. First, if Lewis, an

ardent follower of James and especially Royce, became the quintessential academic philosopher (but the same can be said of Perry and the other “realists”), then we should at least partially revise the picture of James and Royce as utterly anti-professionalized philosophers, and rather investigate how, at the turn of the century, classical pragmatism underwent deep self-criticism and fashioned a philosophy which broke for sure with the past in its emancipation from theology and metaphysics, but in so doing prepared the ground for an *enlightened professionalization* of philosophical discussion inside the academia. Secondly, Lewis himself was not cold to themes and discussions exceeding the academia. His unsung social philosophy (his *The Ground and Nature of the Right* and *Our Social Inheritance* are usually not even considered as worth reading) is an example of his deep concerns for what happened outside philosophy halls. We should perhaps start to revise his moral philosophy as well as an effort not so much in philosophical foundation – meta-ethical or normative alike, despite this is exactly how his ethics looks like, at least superficially–, but rather at philosophical elucidation of our (his) historical present – and there is plenty of this, despite its title, in the recently issued *Essays on the Foundation of Ethics*, where we find more than a gesture towards the understanding of philosophical ethics as a descriptive yet critical investigation of our ordinary moral situation for its practical transformation. This resonates with his earliest metaphilosophical views about philosophy’s consisting in “the mind’s own study of itself in action; and the method is simply reflective. It seeks to formulate explicitly what from the beginning is our own creation and possession.” (*Mind and the World Order*, p. 17). If this task can be sometimes performed from the armchair, still its point is self-understanding from the point of view of conduct. And such doings are the plethora of things we commit to, long for, and theorize about in our ways of world-making well beyond what is usually simplified in oft-caricatural philosophical accounts of them. Via philosophy we should make explicit (and hence perspicuous) what goes on outside it (that is, in conduct). This is no small feat, and an aspect of Lewis which would bring him closer to the classical pragmatists as well as to kindred figures in other philosophical traditions. An aspect still to be fully explored and furthered in our present philosophical situation and practice.

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## NOTES

1. As an aside, which proper treatment would take us way too far, it is rather peculiar how most pragmatist streams are associated with the names of their respective representative figures in a way, say, analytic or continental ones are not. For sure we have Wittgensteinian and Quinean or Heideggerian and Foucauldian philosophies and philosophers, but within pragmatism there has been an almost perfect coincidence between the names of the master thinker of choice and the style and content of the endorsed philosophy. This is slowly changing, though, thanks to recent new efforts in periodization (both historical and theoretical), such as classical/recent/contemporary pragmatism (see R. Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011) or first-experience/second-language/third-conduct wave in pragmatism (see C. Koopman, *Pragmatism in Transition*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009).

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